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By Angilee Shah
Louisa Lim's life as National Public Radio's Shanghai correspondent is characterized by extreme variety. Much like China itself, Lim takes  on many roles: hard-hitting investigative reporter, insightful trend spotter, art connoisseur, mother and even restaurateur. It turns out, she's an excellent email-writer as well.

In a wide-ranging Web 2.0 interview, in between covering the Beijing Olympics and the ever-growing melamine disaster, she described her experiences in her three years as the Beijing correspondent for the BBC and then two with National Public Radio. She talked about the challenges of breaking news but still providing depth of coverage, the West's growing interest in China and the joys of deep fried bumble bees.

Angilee Shah: There is a phrase in the West that has taken on mythical qualities: "Our man in China." But you and many others prove that these days it's likely to actually be "our woman in China" instead. What have been your most memorable (good and bad) experiences as a woman reporting in China? In the last five years, while you've been based in China, have you seen any changes with regards to women in the press?

Louisa Lim: The most memorable experiences as a woman reporting in China would probably have to be a trip I made to Xinjiang in 2003 to cover the AIDS problem there with my then producer at the BBC, Poppy Sebag-Montefiore. At the time she was around 23 and looked even younger. We'd arranged part of the trip officially because we wanted to interview local government officials from the department of health. When we arrived at their office, their faces fell. We sat around, drinking tea and waiting. In the next room, we could hear the government officials conferring with each other worriedly, "What's the BBC doing?", they were asking. "Do you think these are real reporters? They look more like kids on work experience."

Certainly it's a common expectation that a foreign correspondent will be a white middle-aged male, and subverting that expectation can be both entertaining and a useful reportorial tool. In this particular case, it worked to our advantage. The official we interviewed was outrageously condescending and treated us like idiots right until he realised belatedly that he'd admitted all sorts of shortcomings in AIDS provision on tape.

On that trip, I definitely felt the drawbacks of being a female journalist in China. I'd wanted to interview sex workers, and we ended up at an isolated line of truck stop hovels on the outskirts of Urumqi one snowy night at two in the morning, watching men in thick army coats guarding the brothel doors with ferocious guide dogs. It was the first time, and one of the very few times, I'd ever wished that I'd brought a male colleague along as well, just for safety's sake.

Obviously in some cases, it's much easier working as a woman in China, particularly when interviewing women in the countryside, who might be embarrassed or shy about talking to men. For example I did a story talking to some of the last women with bound feet, and I was surprised (and

slightly horrified) at the alacrity with which one woman whisked off her shoes and socks to show me her tiny, misshapen paws. I'm not sure whether she would have done that if I'd been male.

In general, I think the situation has improved somewhat since our Urumqi trip in 2003. I've worked through two pregnancies in China, climbing up glaciers and going down coal mines while pregnant, and have found that my gender is becoming less of an issue as time goes by.

AS: China coverage in the West in the last few months has been dominated by the Olympics, Tibet and human rights records, and, of course, financial growth. Stories about health issues like AIDS aren't all that common in the mass media. Are there any areas of coverage that you think should be better addressed? Do you think the Olympics will help media take more interest in these kinds of stories, or just cause China burnout?

LL: I think the Olympics has caused China fatigue when it comes to certain types of stories, which have been covered so many times that they've become the clichés of China coverage (for example, China's rise or the new face of Beijing or the disappearing hutongs). But I think opinion surveys are showing that the Olympics has caused interest in China overseas to spike. And that will mean more interest in China coverage that gets beyond the clichés. Of course, health issues are now extremely topical, given the contaminated milk scandal, and that's likely to continue. From a practical perspective, given the amount of huge stories involving China this year — the unrest in Tibet, the torch relay, the Sichuan earthquake, the Olympics — it's been difficult to devote much time to do any real in-depth investigative reporting on other issues. But I expect there will be more investigative reporting from the Western media now.

AS: During the Olympics, you did a story about empty seats in Beijing. I was watching many of the events and the closing ceremony on CCTV — it's funny how you never see those empty seats (and how often
you see Hu Jintao). The Columbia Journalism Review ran a really interesting piece about NBC's use of the CCTV feed. How much control do you think China exerted over how international viewers saw the Olympics?

LL: I can't really answer this question in any meaningful fashion as, being in China, I saw the Chinese Olympics, not that seen overseas. I did hear from others that NBC's use of footage veered on the farcical — my editor told me he watched the gymnastics and it appeared only to have two competitors (Liukin and Johnson), both American!

AS: How large is National Public Radio's presence in China? How many bureaus and reporters are there? From health to economy to politics, the country has considerable breadth. How do you decide what to focus on? Is your reporting more often than not driven by what the big news of the day is?

LL: National Public Radio has two permanent correspondents in China: Anthony Kuhn in Beijing and myself in Shanghai. This year has also seen China trips by a number of specialist reporters, for example our Education Correspondent and our Arts Correspondent. Our flagship programme, "All Things Considered," also hosted a special China week, during which two anchors were based in Chengdu. By chance, this coincided with the earthquake in Sichuan, meaning that NPR already had a very strong team of journalists on the ground in Chengdu at the time of the earthquake, and was able to provide the first eyewitness accounts in the Western media.

Obviously this year our reporting has been driven by breaking news, but we do also try to try to get behind the headlines. For example, before the Olympics I did a five-part series on the role of sport in China and how it's being used to rally the masses. Another example of more in-depth coverage was a series that I did onurban development in China, focusing on Shanghai.

We have a commitment to cover China beyond the major cities, and so we travel a tremendous amount to try to reflect the changes that are taking place in the countryside and in smaller cities. I'm providing links to a few of those stories: a slideshow I did with photographer Ariana Lindquist about China's dependence on coal, a story on the resulting environmental damage from the most polluted city in China and a piece from the edge of the Tibetan plateau on China's melting glacier.

NPR's interest in cultural and artistic news is also great for reporters in the field, as radio can really bring alive these stories in a way that other media can't. I've recently worked on a couple of pieces, which have yet to air, about how two young musicians are experimenting with traditional art forms. It focuses on an ex-punk who became a Mongolian throatsinger and a Kunqu singer who's been collaborating with a Belgian jazz pianist. This [linked here] is a story about how Miao people still use a singing festival for courtship in southwestern Yunnan.

AS: How's the British food business treating you? [Ed note: the link is to a piece Lim wrote in 2004 about the Beijing fish-and-chips restaurant she, her husband, and several other partners founded.]

LL: The fish and chip shops are doing very well, though I'm not sure that we've managed to convert that many Chinese customers to the joys of greasy, thick-cut chips! We now have two branches of Fish Nation in Beijing, one in Sanlitun and the other in Nanluoguxiang, near Houhai. Our customers are still mainly expats — often those who've had a drink or two — and we are hoping to become a Beijing institution!

In Shanghai however, we've done something different and opened a Yunnan restaurant called Southern Barbarian. It specialises in cuisine from my husband's hometown, Mengzi, the home of cross-the-bridge-noodles (*guoqiaomixian*). We're becoming pretty well-known for our goats' cheese, charcoal-grilled meat and rice noodles, or *mixian*. This is where we aim to convert Western diners to the joys of Yunnan cuisine, including lesser-known delights like sautéed pomegranate flowers, spicy banana-flower salad and deep fried bumble bees!